Miami Art Museum

MAM

Shirin Neshat

March 20 - June 1, 2003

Born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957, Shirin Neshat came to the United States at age 17 to study art. In 1983 she received a master of fine arts degree from the University of California at Berkeley, where she majored in painting. After graduating she decided not to pursue a career as an artist instead devoting most of her time to co-directing The Storefront for Art and Architecture, an alternative space in New York. It was not until Neshat was in her 30s – after the first of several visits she made in 1990 to her native Iran – that she began making photographs and subsequently videos.

She found the country transformed by the dramatic cultural, social and political changes of the Islamic Revolution. The sense of displacement and exile she felt inspired her to devote her work to an exploration of the profound differences between the Western culture to which she had become assimilated and the Eastern culture in which she was raised. In explaining why she felt compelled to begin making art again she states, "I had reached a sort of intellectual maturity that I didn't have before. I also finally reached a subject that I felt really connected to. So the two were put together and eventually found a visual form."[1]

Her first photographic works and videos explored the role of women in modern Islamic society. "I found them [women] to be the most potent subject, in terms of how the social and political changes caused by the revolution affected their lives, how they embodied this new ideology, and how they were managing to survive the changes."[2]

"From the beginning," she says, "I made a decision that this work was not going to be about me or my opinions on the subject, and that my position was going to be no position. I then put myself in a place of only asking questions but never answering them."[3]

The exhibition at MAM includes six of Neshat's internationally acclaimed video-and-sound environments and twelve related photographs. *Turbulent, Rapture and Fervor* – a trilogy of films made in 1998, 1999, and 2000, respectively – examine how identity is shaped by differences in gender and culture. *Soliloquy* of 1999, and *Pulse* and *Passage* of 2001, communicate universal ideas about desire, exile, freedom, solitude, and death.

While the work stems from Neshat's personal experience of exile and having to come to terms with the upheavals that have engulfed her homeland, these video environments serve as poetic, open-ended meditations on human experience. In Neshat's own words, she engages in "universal dialogues while keeping within the specificity of the Islamic culture."[4]

Made in collaboration with teams of cinematographers, crew, and casts of hundreds, Neshat's installations combine powerful cinematic images with mesmerizing soundtracks by such contemporary composers as Sussan Deyhim and Philip Glass. Her videos do not rely on plots, characters, or dialogue to tell a story. Instead, the artist's mysterious narratives unfold through a combination of richly imaginative and carefully choreographed scenes, dramatic settings, emotive music, and striking visual juxtapositions.

As with any film production, Neshat and her team travel to scout locations, negotiate with local authorities, and hire a crew and cast which consists mainly of locals, sometimes as many as 250 men and women. Because most of the films are shot in impoverished areas, the process often has the added benefit of bringing income to local businesses and residents.

When asked who has influenced her films Neshat says, "I have always been mesmerized by some of the most classic Western black-and-white films, like Orson Welles' *The Trial* and by works like Hitchcock's amazing *The Birds*. I find the combination of photography and suspense rather unnerving. Most recently, the [contemporary] Iranian cinema, especially its great filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, [has] had a great influence on me. I appreciate his vision, poetry, visual language and his independence in relation to both his culture and the world of cinema."[5]

Neshat's video installations differ from traditional cinema in that they are presented as wall-sized video projections that play continuously in rooms that viewers can enter and leave when they choose. The films also break from the traditional cinematic experience of passively sitting before a single screen by frequently placing the viewer in the center of a room between facing screens. In making it physically impossible to absorb both images at once, Neshat allows each spectator to re-create his or her own experience of the work every time they view it.

***Turbulent* 1998** **10 minutes, black and white**

Turbulent presents a series of visual and aural opposites on two facing screens. On one side, a male singer acknowledges the welcoming applause of an all-male audience in a concert hall. Then, turning to face the camera, he sings an impassioned song of divine love and spiritual longing by the 13th-century mystical Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi. When finished, the singer stares out expectantly toward the screen at the other end of the room.

On the opposite screen, a woman in a chador (composer Sussan Deyhim) appears with her back to the camera. In an empty, darkened auditorium, the camera moves around the woman in a slow, enraptured swirl as she begins a wordless series of cries and utterances that seem to emanate from somewhere deep within her body.

According to Neshat, "The film is inspired by the fact that women in Iran are not allowed to perform or record music. ... The woman in *Turbulent* breaks all rules. Firstly, she appears in a theater, where she is simply not supposed to be. Secondly, her singing breaks all the norms of classical music. It is not intrinsically linked to language. She improvises. So what we have here is a set of oppositions... but we also talk about how women achieve a certain kind of freedom, how they become combative and unpredictable in this society, while men continue to live conventional lives."[6]

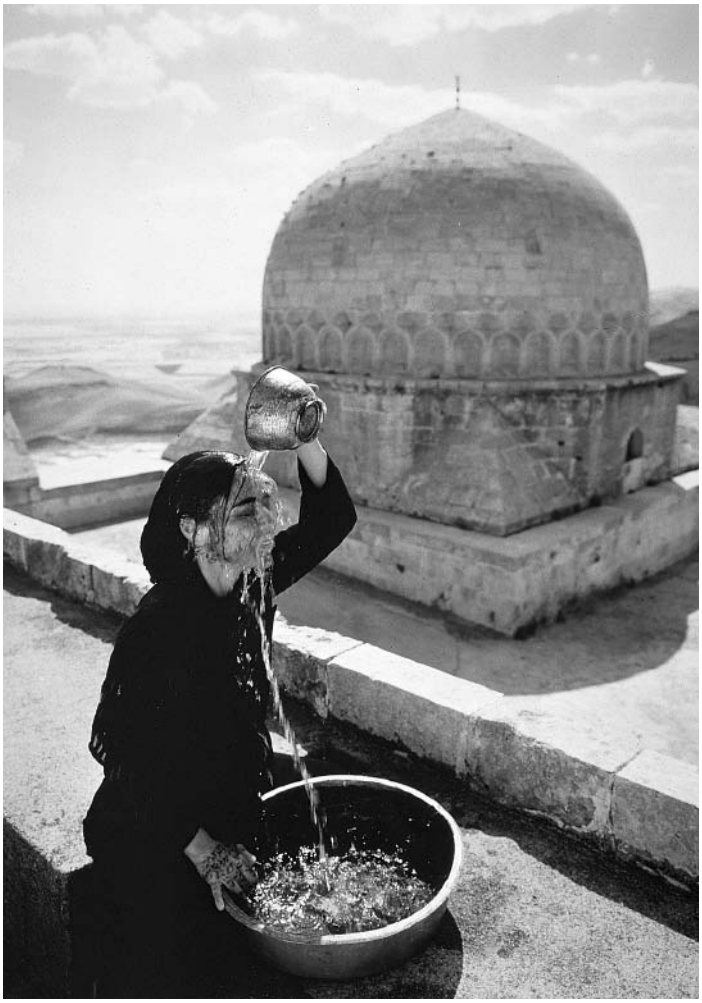
***Rapture* 1999** **13 minutes, black and white**

Filmed in Essaouira, Morocco, *Rapture* consists of two screens on opposite walls onto which Neshat juxtaposes a series of images exploring gender relations in Islamic society. To one side, 125 men in black pants and white shirts taking part in assorted group rituals wind their way through an ancient seaside fortress – the same fortress used by Orson Welles in his production of *Othello*. Across the room, an equal number of women in black chadors approach from a distance, through the desert towards the sea. The men's space of the fortress suggests the world of culture, social principles, tradition, and architecture, which is constructed and limited, as a means of control. The women's space represents nature as a wild, uncontrollable, unpredictable force, the desert and the sea, symbols of openness and infinity.

The percussive soundtrack by Sussan Deyhim reaches a climax when the women gather in the foreground and begin to ululate – a ceremonial form of chanting – stopping the men dead in their tracks. The two groups gaze at one another across the room. The women then turn and determinedly continue across the harsh terrain. The men go back to their rituals. They eventually make their way to the ramparts of the fortress where they take note of the women, who have reached the shore and are dragging a small wooden boat across the sand to the water. Six of the women climb into the boat and drift out to sea as the men watch and wave from the ramparts. Thus ends Neshat's majestic and mysterious fable about destiny and adversity.

***Fervor* 2000** **10 minutes, black and white**

In contrast to *Rapture* and *Turbulent, Fervor* focuses on the idea of commonalities rather than opposites. Filmed in Marrakesh, *Fervor* is presented on two side-by-side screens. The work begins with a momentary encounter between a man and a woman whose paths cross. In passing, their eyes meet, but no contact is made, and they go their separate ways. According to Neshat, "[In Iran,] you're not supposed to make eye contact with the opposite sex. Every Iranian man and woman



understands the dilemma, the problematics, and yet there is the joy of a simple exchange in a gaze. This type of social and religious control tends to heighten desire and the sexual atmosphere. Therefore, when there is a modest exchange it is the most magical, sexual experience."[7]

Later the two meet again by chance at a crowded public ceremony where men and women are divided by a curtain and a man on stage tells a moral lesson about the sins of desire based on the story of Youssef and Zuleika from the *Koran*. As the speech becomes more and more intense and aggressive in tone, the man's and the woman's initial excitement over their modest flirtation turns into anxiety, confusion and guilt, eventually leading to the woman's hurried exit.

"[In this work] I was inspired by public Friday prayers in Iran, where masses of men and women come together, but sit separately. Usually, a distinguished mullah leads the prayers and delivers a moral speech... So in *Fervor*, this man comes on the stage and offers his moral speech which happens to be the problem of sin, particularly sin that arises from sexual behavior – carnal desire." [8]

***Soliloquy* 1999** **15 minutes, color**

Soliloquy, with Neshat acting as the protagonist, explores self-identity and a splitting of the self. The dual projection shows a veiled Neshat roaming through an anonymous modern cityscape on one screen and exploring a traditional Eastern locale on the other. In this narrative, Neshat uses architecture as a means of representing the differences between two cultures.

According to Neshat, "*Soliloquy*, [is] about imagining the emotional state of a woman standing at the threshold of two opposite worlds. She is constantly negotiating between two cultures that are not just different from one another but in complete conflict. ... The location in the 'East,' where it was shot, is ancient, traditional and communal but also a controlling society, at times suffocating, as there is no personal – individual – space. The location in the 'West' is in a modern, free, extremely individualistic society where we sense a great personal isolation and loneliness. By the end we find that the woman never quite feels at peace in either space."[9]

"This experience of course is not unique, as the globalization of the world and the rapid migration has uprooted many of us sometimes by choice, other times due to economic factors. Whatever the reason, those of us living in the state of the 'in between' have certain advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of being exposed to a new culture and in my case the freedom that comes with living in the USA. The disadvantages of course being that you will never experience again being in a 'center' or quite at 'home' anywhere." [10]

***Pulse* 2001** **7 minutes 30 seconds, black and white**

Pulse is presented as a single screen. We see evidence of Hitchcock's technique of building suspense through slow camera pans and Welles' sense of lighting to create drama as the camera slowly winds along the walls of a darkened bedroom interior. The camera's slow pace is echoed by the reverberating sound of a pulse. At the center of the room, a woman kneels in front of a radio listening to a duet of a man and woman singing a melancholy song of soulful yearning by mystic poet Rumi.

The woman listens and sings the words back, as if in private conversation with the voices emanating from the radio. As the camera exits the room, the woman's sense of longing is made more palpable by the increasing sound of the reverberating pulse.

According to Neshat, "…[it's] about entering this interior space of the woman, and the camera, music and art direction are all emphasizing the sensuality of this space but we are also entering her mind. We take a glimpse into the private world of the woman and it becomes very erotic. She's not wearing a veil, her arms are exposed, her legs are exposed. The song really becomes the main conversation here…" [11]

Passage **2001** **11 min 30 seconds, color**

Commissioned by composer Philip Glass, *Passage* is a meditation on the universal subject of the cycles of birth, life and death, and on the burial rituals found in almost every culture. Neshat slowly reveals the parallel elements of her story through a series of intercut sequences. In one sequence, a group of men carry a body, draped in a white cloth, down a long and difficult path along the ocean's shore, over sandy dunes, and through a vast expanse of desert. Another sequence shows a group of veiled women vigorously digging a hole in rocky earth with their bare hands. The funerary procession of the men and the ritual preparations of the women are both rhythmically underscored by Glass's orchestration. A third sequence depicts a small girl playing with sticks and stones near the digging women. In the final scene, all – the men, the women and the child – are united in a single frame. When the men place the body on the ground, a fire ignites near the playing child and burns in a line which encircles the women, the men, and the dead body.

Shoja Azari, a frequent collaborator of Neshat's, states: "*Passage* is an eloquent visual poem that symbolically tells the story of human loss, grief, tradition, renewal and hope in the face of existential wondering, awe and mystery. Disconnected and cut off, man suffers under the burdens of his own making. He forms rituals, adheres to traditions and hides his dead. Unaffected by his journey through the elements and environment, he marches on blindly attempting to maintain eternally what is constantly in a state of flux. Yet youth confronts tradition by rekindling the flames of knowledge and enlightenment thus providing hope for reconciliation, renewal and rebirth." [12]

Lorie Mertes
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1 Shirin Neshat and Shazia Sikander, *Viewpoints* interview with Asia Society Vice President Vishakha Desai, December 2000, www.asiasource.org/arts/viewpoints1.cfm (2000).
2 Shirin Neshat quoted in Octavio Zaya, "Shirin Neshat," *Interview* (September 1999), p. 165.
3 Lina Bertucci, "Shirin Neshat Eastern Values," *Flash Art* (November/December 1997), p. 84.
4 Bertucci, ibid., p. 87.
5 Gerald Matt, "In Conversation with Shirin Neshat," *Shirin Neshat,* Wein: Kunsthalle, Wein and London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000, p. 23.
6 *Shirin Neshat (Iran/USA), Video: Warsaw, Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle, May 28-August 15, 2002*, www.culture.pl/en/culture/artkuly/wy_wy_neshat-csw (2002).
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8 Octavio Zaya, "Through the Experience of an Islamic Woman," *Shirin Neshat*, Kanazawa: Office for Contemporary Art Museum Construction, 2001, p. 20-24.
9 Danto, op cit., p. 67.
10 Shirin Neshat, "Re: Ask the Artists: Shirin Neshat." Carnegie International: 99/00. Online forum (February 19-27, 2003).
11 Adrian Dannatt, "Shirin Neshat: where madness is the greatest freedom," *The Art Newspaper*, (June 2001), p. 76.
12 Shoja Azari, "An Inside Look at Shirin Neshat's Art," *Shirin Neshat,* Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2001, p. 121.

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COVER AND INSIDE LEFT (BOTTOM): *Rapture Series* 1999. **INSIDE LEFT (TOP):** *Turbulent Series* 1998. **CENTER:** *Soliloquy Series* 2000. All works courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photos taken by Larry Barns